
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

by Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem's
Consumer Protection and Antitrust Division

January 12, 2005

Free Credit Reports

Your credit report contains information on where you live, how you pay your bills, and whether you have been sued, arrested, or filed for bankruptcy. This information is sold by the nationwide consumer reporting companies to creditors, insurers, employers, and other businesses that use it to evaluate your applications for credit, employment or renting a home.

Have you ever wondered why you had to pay to view your own credit report? Consumers have previously been able to get free credit reports only after being turned down for credit or if they lived in one of the few states where law mandated a free report each year. Well, you don't have to pay anymore. Under an amendment to the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) passed in December 2003, effective in December 2004, consumers will be entitled to a free credit report every year from each of the three big credit reporting bureaus that maintain them.

However, state and federal authorities expect a new wave of scams to emerge as the free credit reports begin to be offered by the three nationwide credit reporting agencies. North Dakotans will be able to obtain their free credit reports beginning in March 2005.

It is likely consumers will be receiving solicitations by e-mail, mail and/or telephone offering assistance in obtaining the free credit reports. Remember, the only legitimate way to receive a free credit report under the new law will be to personally request one from any of the three credit reporting companies. There will be no costs associated with the report. The credit bureaus may try to sell you additional in-depth credit information and services when you request your free report, but that is an option. You are not required to purchase any of the additional services.

The three nationwide consumer reporting companies have set up one central website, toll-free telephone number, and mailing address through which you must order your free annual report. You need do only one of the following:

1. Access www.annualcreditreport.com; or
2. Call 877-322-8228; or
3. Complete the Annual Credit Report Request Form found at www.ftc.gov/credit.

Mail the completed form to:

Annual Credit Report Request Service
PO Box 105281
Atlanta, GA 30348-5281

You may order your reports from each of the three companies at the same time. The law allows you to order one free copy from each of the three reporting agencies every twelve months. Once you receive your free copy of your credit report, it is important to review the information provided in the report to make certain it is accurate.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, has prepared a brochure, Your Access To Free Credit Reports, explaining your rights and how to order a free annual credit report. You can access this brochure online at <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/conline/pubs/credit/freereports.htm>.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

* * * * *